

## Central New York key in the War of 1812 fight; communities ready to mark 200th anniversary

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**Debra J. Groom / The Post-Standard**  
By



Collection of Paul Lear

British ships are ready to attack Oswego in May 1814 during the War of 1812. This is from an engraving by William Steele.

Central New York -- As 2012 begins, New York state and Central New York organizations are gearing up to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812.

Oswego County played a central role in the conflict between the fledgling United States and powerhouse Great Britain, but men from across Central New York fought in the war and local companies provided supplies.

From Jefferson to Onondaga, Madison to Cayuga counties, a variety of people and places figured into the struggle with the British.

The United States declared war on Britain June 18, 1812, after the British seized American ships and

pressed American sailors into service in the British navy. Britain also restricted U.S. trade with France and incited Native Americans to attack settlers trying to push westward.

The war ended in 1815 with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent, [dpa: cq: ] and no real winner or loser.

The war brought thousands of men together to fight and featured several battles in Oswego County.

"The area was a very important location for storage of military goods," said Oswego County Historian Justin White. "Many of the goods were stored in Oswego and then distributed to other areas, especially Sackets Harbor."

There were battles and skirmishes throughout New York state, including the Battle of Sackets Harbor May 29, 1813, the Battle of Oswego May 5 and 6, 1814 and the Battle of Big Sandy (near today's Sandy Creek) May 30, 1814.

Lake Ontario was central to the war, as British forces in Canada tried to take control of the waterway for easy access to United States.

That pushed the city of Oswego and Oswego County into prominence, White said.

"It was a gateway inland as well as a storage area for military goods," he said. "That was Oswego's role in other wars, as well. It was a strategic location."

In May 1814, battles were fought at Fort Ontario and Sandy Creek as the British tried to disrupt the supply route from points east to Oswego and Sackets Harbor. Fort Ontario Manager Paul Lear wrote that had the British been successful, they would have controlled Lake Ontario and been able to invade the United States through Oswego.

Another key Oswego County event in the war was the Great Cable Carry. Lear wrote that shortly after the Battle of Oswego in 1814, the American fleet was stifled by a blockade at Sackets Harbor.

In an effort to move supplies to U.S. troops, Lt. Melancthon Woolsey[dpa: cq: ] tried to use small boats to access Sackets Harbor. He was discovered by the British and driven back to Big Sandy Creek, according to Lear. So Woolsey decided to move the supplies by wagons and ox carts, Lear wrote.

"One 600-foot ship cable (an anchor rope) weighed 9,600 pounds. This 'Great Cable' or 'Great Rope' was partially loaded onto an ox cart as the remainder of the cable was hoisted onto the shoulders of about 200 to 300 militiamen working in relays of 100 men each," Lear wrote.

"The serpentine line of cable-carriers passed from village to village during the 20-mile journey where they were met with growing enthusiasm, refreshments, and replacements for those too exhausted or injured to continue. Mats of woven grass were fashioned to protect the shoulders of cable-carriers."

Lear wrote that the rope made its way to Sackets Harbor, the USS Superior and other warships were completed and launched and the U.S. Navy gained the advantage over the British on Lake Ontario in late 1814.

Oswego County's War of 1812 commemoration committee is searching for a copy of a play titled "The Great Rope," written by the late Rosemary Nesbitt, [dpa: cq: ]former Oswego historian. Organizers want to stage the play for the war's bicentennial celebration.

But Oswego County was not the only place in Central New York where the War of 1812 was waged. In Onondaga County, one of a number of arsenals supplying munitions was on Onondaga Hill, near today's intersection of Seneca Turnpike and South Salina Street.

"It was stocked with a number of munitions, like flints and muskets," said Dennis Connors, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Society. "It was constructed as one of several around the state as officials could foresee upcoming hostilities."

Connors said Onondaga County wasn't the scene of any battles during the war, but soldiers often could be seen marching north or traveling west along the Seneca Turnpike, one of the major east-west roadways. Sometimes, British prisoners of war also marched along the turnpike on their way to a POW camp near Albany, he said.

Two of these soldiers are buried on the side of Seneca Turnpike halfway up Onondaga Hill not far from Upstate

University Hospital at Community General. Connors said Capt. Benjamin Branch of the First U.S. Light Artillery "fell sick at Onondaga Hollow and died in October of 1814. They buried him on the west hill along the turnpike."

Connors said Capt. Henry Crouch, who had been captured by the British at Fort Erie and sent to Halifax, Nova Scotia as a prisoner of war, died at Marcellus in the spring of 1815 as he headed back to his home of Conhocton, south of Rochester.

"He was taken ill in Marcellus with smallpox and died there. The residents decided to bury him next to his fellow officer, a few miles to the east, along the turnpike," Connors said.

In Cayuga County, barracks for local troops passing to and from Fort Niagara were built on the north side of West Genesee Street in Auburn.

County Historian Linda Frank said Henry Hall's "History of Auburn" notes: "The sudden capture and burning of Buffalo and Black Rock, in the winter of 1813, was the origin of wide-spread panic in Western New York. . . . the news came to Auburn in the evening and, being reported on the street, threw the village into the wildest alarm."

In Madison County, a green at Quality Hill in Lenox, on Route 5 two miles west of Canastota, was a place where a company of horse artillery drilled during the war. A historic marker notes the spot.

And two men, Jabez Hurd, of Cazenovia, and Nathaniel King, of Hamilton, served as generals during the war.

### **Upcoming War of 1812 events in Oswego County**

Oswego County is a member of the Great Lakes Seaway Trail, a regional organization planning to release a War of 1812 guidebook and free brochures in 2012. Interpretive signs will be done and the group will sponsor a War of 1812 Reproduction Quilt Show, War of 1812-themed geo-cache trail and folkswalk from 2012 to 2014.

The Oswego County War of 1812 Commemoration Committee is in the midst of planning events such as an Oswego County War of 1812 Symposium (next one is set for March 31) and Oswego War of 1812 International Peace Garden, part of a permanent bi-national peace garden trail and driving tour.

The Friends of Fort Ontario are seeking a grant to commission a painting of the U.S.S. Oneida off Oswego Harbor in 1813. The Oneida was in more engagements than any other US Navy ship during the War of 1812.

### **About the symposium**

What: The Oswego County War of 1812 Commemoration Committee is putting on a symposium featuring noted historians who will focus on the war on the New York-Canadian frontier.

When: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., March 31

Where: The American Foundry, 246 W. Seneca St., Oswego.

Speakers, topics: John Grodzinski, sea power on the Great Lakes; Clayton Nans, Marines in the war; Gary Gibson, Sackets Harbor in the war; Benjamin Ford, sunken ships of Chauncey and Yeo; and Doug George-Kanentiio, the Iroquois in the War of 1812.

Admission: Including lunch, \$25, or \$15 with a valid student ID. Advance registration and payment required. Visit **this website link to download** registration forms.

Contact Debra J. Groom at **at this email address or call** her at 470-3254 or 251-5586

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